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Risk Factors for Psychological Stress Injuries

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By Capt. Scott L. Johnston, MSC, USN, director, [Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control](#)



As Sailors, each of us has a responsibility to look out for our Shipmates, especially in relation to the stress injuries that can be brought on by the unrelenting high-tempo operations we now experience at sea and on land. Why is this so important? Primarily because the person suffering from stress often is the last one to recognize it.

We need to be able to identify those who are having problems because personal readiness, of course, affects mission readiness. Stress that is not effectively handled will accumulate and result in behavior changes that can undermine an individual's capabilities, good judgment and cohesiveness with the unit.

The [Navy's Stress Continuum](#) is an excellent tool for us to use on a daily basis for ourselves and for our Shipmates. Its color-coded zones help us to detect and defuse stress reactions before they become stress injuries.

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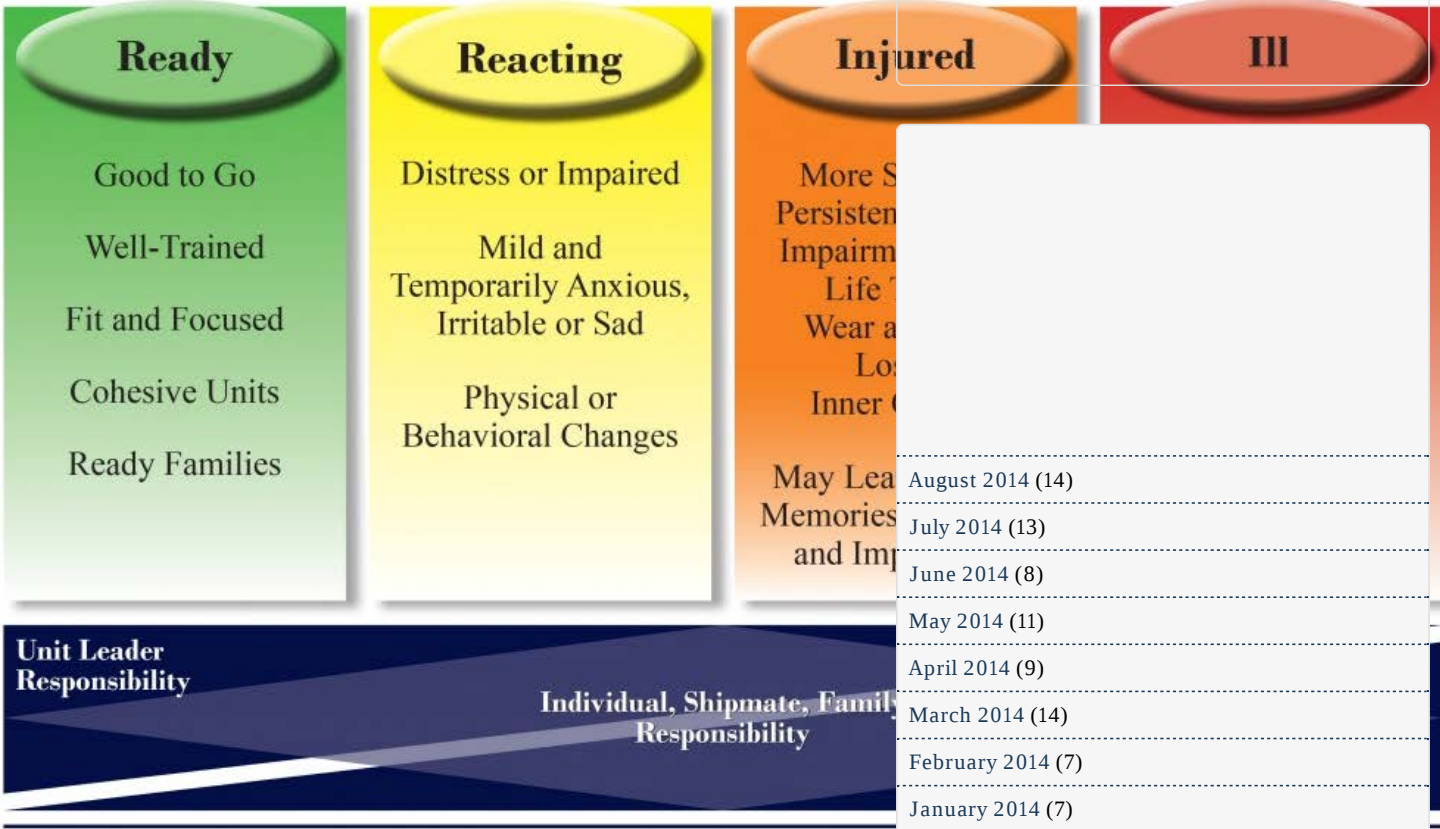
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THE COMBAT AND OPERATIONAL STRESS CONTINUUM



Certain factors can make a person more susceptible to stress injuries. These factors do not automatically mean a Sailor will be hurt by excessive stress, but it is useful to be aware of them. Risk factors include:

- Repeat deployments without sufficient time to recover and reset
- Duration of current deployment more than six months
- Sleeping, on average, less than 6 to 8 hours per day
- Witnessing death close up
- Being responsible for the death or serious injury of a non-combatant
- Losing a close friend or valued leader in combat or other operations
- Witnessing or participating in violations of the Law of War and the Navy Code of Conduct
- Being physically injured, especially if seriously
- Sustaining a traumatic brain injury

- Close brushes with death, especially if the individual believed he or she was going to die
- Handling human remains
- History of previous stress injuries, whether sustained during or prior to Navy service
- Previous psychological health problems
- Being new to the unit or lacking mutual trust with other unit members
- Family separation, personal relationship problems, financial difficulties or other home-front stressors
- Being young and inexperienced

It's our responsibility as Sailors to not only recognize stress injuries, but to ensure that our Shipmates take advantage of the resources available to treat stress. After all, force readiness is everyone's responsibility.

For more information on NCCOSC's stress management resources, click [here](#).

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THE COMBAT AND OPERATIONAL STRESS CONTINUUM

Ready

Good to Go
Well-Trained
Fit and Focused
Cohesive Units
Ready Families

Reacting

Distress or Impaired
Mild and
Temporarily Anxious,
Irritable or Sad
Physical or
Behavioral Changes

Injured

More Severe or
Persistent Stress or
Impairment due to
Life Threat,
Wear and Tear,
Loss or
Inner Conflict
May Leave Lasting
Memories, Reactions
and Impressions

Ill

Stress Injuries
that Don't Heal
without Help
Symptoms Persist,
Get Worse or
Initially Get Better
then Return Worse

**Unit Leader
Responsibility**

**Individual, Shipmate, Family
Responsibility**

**Caregiver
Responsibility**